

Plymouth Welfare Rights Forum

Warspite Room
Council House

Thursday 26th March 2009
1.00 to 4.00pm

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Attendance List:

Gill Tishler – Plymouth Citizens Advice Bureau - PCAB
Gill Joyce – DWP – Pension Service
Mel Sinclair - Plymouth BDC - Social Fund
Alison Roberts – Plymouth BDC - Social Fund
Chris Johnson – Plymouth BDC - JCP
Denise Crawford – Plymouth OTC - JCP
Gary Edwards – PCC HB
Julia Slade – LARK Childrens Centre - LARKCC
Scott Robertson – Alabare Floating Support Service – AFSS
Donna Ryall – Mind
Dave Hay – Mind
Stuart Toll – Devon Law Centre - DLC
Mo Rafferty – William Sutton Homes – WSH
Patrick Healy – Plymouth Guild – DIAC
Eunice Halliday – Plymouth Foodbank
Carol Griffin – Broadreach Ocean Quay – BOQ
Russell King - Broadreach Ocean Quay – BOQ
Marie Partridge – Colebrook Housing Society
Wendy Huson – Perennial
Val Welford – DWP FIS – Jobcentre Plus
Joanna Ashton – PCC Rent Arrears Intervention Worker
Pat Newton – Housing Services – PCC
Jackie Millard – Midland House – Westcountry HA – WHA
Gerry Smalley – East Cornwall CAB – Welfare Rights
Marie Tonkin – Plymouth CAB – Volunteer
Karen Sharpe - Plymouth CAB – Bureau Service Manager

Apologies:

Lynn Herbert (Pluss)
Les Cole (CFIS)
Kate Oppong (DLC)
John Williams (Claimants Union)
Austen Mintern (The Zone)

Chaired by Gill Tishler (PCAB)

Accuracy of minutes from the 22nd January

Chris (JCP) wanted to clarify that with regards to the Community Care Grants and Budgeting loans he did not say that there were no targets, he had said he didn't know what the targets were and had no idea of the budgets available.

Russell (BOQ) commented that there does not seem to be a level playing field for clients with regards to decisions on applications for Crisis Loans. Would the decision makers take into account historical facts, such as previous applications for loans and the reason for applying?

Julia (LarkCC) wanted to look into the minute taking in general, because it is sometimes difficult to make sense of the record if you haven't been present for the discussion.

Matters Arising

Karen(PCAB) wanted to apologize as copies of the PowerPoint were not sent out. This will now be done. ACTION: Karen Sharpe

Chris (JCP) has asked if someone from Wick (Habitual Residence Test team) will come down to one of the Forums - he may have identified someone but they would try to fit in attendance when they are in the area delivering training.

Reports:

Housing Benefit

For Housing Benefit and Ctax performance indicators update, see additional information on page 6

26,000 letters, very busy piloting new way of working (all claims being taken at JCP then transferred to PCC) – very early contact with the customers meaning more labour intensive but still managing to get some claims through in 2-3 days.

Gary (PCC) reported that they are not getting the number of claims through that was expected. There seems to be a problem with mobile phone numbers, not picking up the area code. Chris (JCP) commented that because for the pilot all the participating organisations were in one building some of these problems were not picked up at the pilot stage and are only now becoming apparent.

Julia (LarkCC) asked with regards to the Local Housing Allowance does the birth of a baby in the household make a difference to an upgrade to 1 or 2 bedrooms. Gary (PCC) yes it does from the day of birth.

Gary also advised that as of April, anyone requiring a 6 bedroom property will be restricted to the 5 bedroom rate.

Russell (BOQ) Can you get hard copies of the Change of Circumstances Form?
Gary (PCC) No you would have to download this form.

Russell (BOQ) enquired about vulnerable client claims. Gary (PCC) needed to know from landlords if tenants are not paying rent at an early stage to enable them to investigate sooner, rather than when arrears have built up. There has been a 72% increase in private landlords not taking on tenants on Housing Benefit.

Disability Benefits Centre - No Questions asked

HMRC

Karen (PCAB) reported back on a meeting with HMRC representatives at which the very strong view of the PWRP that HMRC should attend every other meeting regularly had been forcefully argued. HMRC had asked for the arguments to be included in the note of the meeting and had undertaken to go back to the department and seek further advice.. A response is awaited.

Jobcentre Plus

For Plymouth BDC current performance indicators update, see additional information on pages 7 - 9

Chris (JCP): claims are going up, along with performance on claims and changes – despite increased volumes there is improved performance on virtually everything. Having issues with new claims and incapacity benefit. Denise (JCP) Social Fund: down on statistics, have had new staff taken on and 11 more by May.

Dave (Mind) asked if more pre-paid envelopes could be sent out to advisers. Envelopes which are written out by hand seem to be going missing. Gary (PCC) asked if Post Office supply us with these envelopes? Chris (JCP) explained there are problem with costs with regards to the stationery budget. Chris would get a bundle of pre-paid envelopes to Forum members. Also pointed out that Royal Mail have authorisation to open post from Exeter Street, unless marked “not to be opened” – ie private mail. ACTION: Chris

Pat (DIAC) asked should internal systems pick up the fact clients have been paid too much Income Support. Chris (JCP): clients should be responsible for notifying about SDA.

Pat (DIAC) had concern with regard to First Contact Centre staff and claims for ESA - income based and contributions based - Chris (JCP) would look into scripts regarding whether or not people are entitled to claim. ACTION: Chris

Pat (DIAC) also raised concerns that advisers weren't getting the call backs from JCP staff, as requested. Pat (DIAC) said the problem is people do not come through to the direct number. Chris (JCP) asked everyone to log if problems with call backs. Karen (PCAB) asked if someone could come in and explain the system. Chris (JCP) would organise to get someone down from FCC. ACTION: Chris

Dave (Mind) has had problems with faxing JCP. Chris (JCP) would speak to BT with regards to faxing from Glenbourne.

Mel (JCP) explained that the review of Social Fund claims is now being carried out in Plymouth again at OTC although the crisis loans are still going through call centres in Bristol. Dave (Mind) commented on not being able to get through to Bristol Social Fund.

Gill (DWP) mentioned to give as much info on client as possible to help with decision making. Mel (JCP) suggested giving supporting letters, reasons why certain items (e.g cooker) are required for example they may have a health condition.

Scott (AFSS) wanted to get hold of copy letters that itemise the community care grant award, rather than being sent the decision and the amount to be paid. Chris (JCP) there will not be a problem getting it back from archive should take 2 weeks.

Pat (PCC) commented on the Social Fund's telephone system, when you have waited in a queue for ages wondered why you get cut off. Chris (JCP) explained that because of the age of the building it isn't possible to get anymore phone lines in.

Following the success of a regional meeting between CAB & JCP staff a few months ago where Social Fund Customer Service staff were present, Chris (JCP) suggested requesting they attend a future forum meeting.

ACTION: Chris (JCP) to contact

Pat (PCC) said that reviews are taking 10-12 weeks compared with a target 9-10 weeks for community care grants. Because these are taking 10-12 weeks, people have to move into properties without even very basic furnishing, which may have been specially adapted for them, but which they then find it difficult to stay in and the tenancy fails. This causes great distress. Mel (JCP) explained that appeals are now going through in 2-3 weeks. Jackie (WHA) mentioned that the awards have changed and they are putting lots of evidence in to support claims. Mel (JCP) pointed out that it does depend on what time of year you put your review in. The Community Care Grant applications have gone sky high, and decision makers are having to be mindful of budget. When allocating prices for items, it would help if it was noted where the amount was sourced from e.g. Argos. Russell (BOQ) commented on the fact that people are moving into houses with nothing because the claims are taking so long. Clients struggle and can potentially lose their property because of the backlog. As much evidence as possible is being put in with claims but they are still getting turned down and they then have to go through appeal procedure. The Independent Review Service states most claims should go through. Chris (JCP) advised that all reviews are being done in one place and the views of the IRS should be treated with caution.

Pension Service

Gill (DWP) explained now takes 40 working days to process pension credit claims although very urgent cases can be pushed through more quickly. Benefit take up exceeded the requirements due to new staff and systems. Gill (DWP) can be contacted on 01752 307690 direct line - will pick up any messages.

Gary (PCC) - assessed income periods for those aged over 80 is now extended to indefinite. Gill (DWP) reported that they are not reviewing pension credit claims for those aged over 80 - this frees up time to process other claims. Income Support changes at 60 over to state Pension Credit. Chris (JCP) mentioned to encourage people to change over from Incapacity Benefit to Pension Credit as will be better off. Dave (Mind) asked if people on JSA would go to pension credit. Chris (JCP) confirmed does include JSA when aged over 60 - let pension credit know.

Themes for future meetings

Pat (PCC) suggested further information would be useful on Pathways to work and what is on offer from the various providers in the city. Chris (JCP) suggested it would be worth trying to get a person from one of the organisations who attended the event in Exeter - they had an understanding of virtually everything and could perhaps give a presentation.

Action: Chris to contact

Any other business

Dave(Mind) Social Policy – campaigning for benefits to continue for people going into hospital - explained people are getting into debt as DLA gets taken away from them while they are in hospital - confirmed would pass information to Karen (PCAB).

Pat (DIAC) Housing Benefit - asked how long is given to clear the property when a person has died. Gary (PCC) there is discretion on circumstances.

Pat (DIAC) mentioned about the Disability Rights Handbooks. Karen (PCAB) had put an order in for 5 copies of the current one - asked if people could let her know if they want one by e-mail. The new (2009/10) Disability Rights Handbooks are not out until May.

Gill (PCAB) confirmed date of next meeting - 28th May 2009.

Date of next meeting

Thursday 28 May 1 pm – 4 pm.

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Additional Information

Housing Benefit and Ctax Performance Indicators - Statistics produced February

Average Processing Times –

New Claims – 27.44 days (Dec. 29.15 days)

Change of Circumstances- 13.51 days (Dec. 16.86 days)

All events – 20.48 days (Dec. 23 days)

Current work situation –

Our caseload is continuing to increase and we have seen a marked increase in the number of new claims received. We are prioritising new claims and have seen some slippage on change of circumstances, but operate a system to fastrack urgent cases. We are also very busy as we have just uprated all of our caseload for 2009/10 and sent everyone a new letter, which always generates an increase in notification of changes in circumstances.

The pilot for the new way of working is continuing and a proportion of new claims are being processed by making early contact with the customer, this has reduced the processing for those claims significantly, with some claims being processed in 2 to 3 days. The new way of working takes longer initially, but saves time in chasing up evidence. We are working in partnership with customer services on piloting the new way of working and the next stage will be to release some of the customer services staff to be trained in the assessment of HB claims so they become an additional resource, but this is difficult due to our current work levels.

In and Out of Work Processes – we have met with our opposite numbers in JCP to look at some of the issues that have arisen since the new processes were put in place. One of the issues that is difficult to address is when customers use mobile phones, their calls are not routed to the correct call centre and are not picked up for the new processes.

Ge/26/03/09

PLYMOUTH BDC – CURRENT PERFORMANCE – as at 13.3.09

| New Claims | Target (days) | Current | YTD | Previous YTD |
|------------|---------------|---------|-------|--------------|
| JSA | 11.5 | 9.03 | 9.69 | 10.05 |
| IS | 10 | 7.03 | 9.49 | 9.78 |
| IB | 15 | 24.39 | 11.89 | 11.33 |
| ESA | | 12.50 | 12.82 | 9.41 |

| Changes | Target (days) | Current | YTD | Previous YTD |
|---------|---------------|---------|------|--------------|
| JSA | 4 | 5.02 | 4.31 | 3.84 |
| IS | 4 | 1.76 | 2.29 | 2.27 |
| IB | 4 | 4.74 | 4.47 | 4.62 |
| ESA | | 2.99 | 2.90 | 1.97 |

| Telephony | Target (answer in 30 seconds) | Target met (days) | Target not met (days) | Daily average |
|-----------|-------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|---------------|
| JSA | 90% | 16 | 4 | 91% |
| IS | 90% | 17 | 3 | 92% |
| IB | 90% | 15 | 5 | 92% |
| ESA | 90% | 12 | 8 | 88% |

| Social Fund | Target (days) | Current | YTD |
|------------------|---------------|---------|------|
| Bud / loans | 6 | 4.07 | 6.26 |
| SS Mat Grants | 5 | 3.18 | 5.18 |
| Comm Care Grants | 9 | 7.69 | 8.41 |

New claims for JSA is still our biggest area of work. The number of claims received in the South West for week ending 13.3.09 is 119% up on 2008.

With the introduction of ESA the number of new claims for IS and IB has reduced. However, if we take the number of new claims received for all 3 benefits, this shows an increase of 11% on the previous year.

PLYMOUTH BDC – NEW CLAIMS RECEIVED

(Monday 9.3.09 to Friday 13.3.09)

(the smaller figures shown underneath are details I previously gave for week ending 16.1.09 for comparison purposes)

JSA

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 1175

B - Claims received in week = 1122

C - Claims to be assessed (A + B) = 2297

Claims o/s at end of week = 1295 (of which 192 require further info / evidence)

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 722

B - Claims received in week = 1741

C - Claims to be assessed (A + B) = 2463

Claims o/s at end of week = 968 (of which 178 require further info / evidence)

IS

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 251

B - Claims received in week = 182

C - Claims to be assessed (A + B) = 433

Claims o/s at end of week = 240 (of which 154 require further info / evidence)

IS

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 183

B - Claims received in week = 189

C - Claims to be assessed (A + B) = 372

Claims o/s at end of week = 175 (of which 125 require further info / evidence)

IB

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 61

B - Claims received in week = 15

C - Claims to be assessed = 76

Claims o/s at end of week = 34 (of which 17 require further info / evidence)

IB

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 119

B - Claims received in week = 30

C - Claims to be assessed = 149

Claims o/s at end of week = 108 (of which 72 require further info / evidence)

ESA

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 363

B - Claims received in week = 312

C - Claims to be assessed = 675

Claims o/s at end of week = 342 (of which 205 require further info / evidence)

ESA

A - Claims o/s from previous week = 364

B - Claims received in week = 287

C - Claims to be assessed = 651

Claims o/s at end of week = 407 (of which 237 require further info / evidence)